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DE RUEHAK #2145/01 2321246

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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3472

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002145

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/19/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: GUL PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY OPENS A NEW ERA

REF: A. ANKARA 2118

1B. ANKARA 2133

Classified By: Charge Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary. Turkey's long tradition of tumultuous politics has entered a new phase with FM Gul's renomination for president. The once all-powerful military, who tried to derail Gul's earlier bid with dire warnings of Islamic fundamentalism, have been knocked down a notch, and the "bedrock" party of the secular elite, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), is in total disarray. Parliament's two new players, the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), have made self-interested procedural concessions that will virtually ensure Gul's election. While the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) landslide has positioned it for a rare second term of single-party rule, debate continues over whether a vote for AKP was also a vote for "President" Gul. With not so distant memories of violent political crisis and economic collapse still raw for many, Gul's challenge as president will be to prove his independence from political pressures and his ability to represent all Turks as the country moves toward greater democracy, economic prosperity and religious tolerance. End Summary.

Gul for President: Then and Now

12. (C) Last April, Gul's candidacy -- a partial compromise from PM Erdogan's widely expected (or dreaded) bid -- was the focal point of actions by the opposition, military, Constitutional Court, and NGOs to agitate the public, prevent the presidential election, and force early general elections. Instead of the expected embarrassing defeat for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the opposition's strategy backfired with a resounding AKP win in the July 22 elections. Of the many explanations for the result, including economic stability and a reaction against military interference in politics, voters clearly showed they are not afraid of AKP's agenda or intentions. AKP supporters maintain that the party's defiant refusal to appease the military was an important reason for AKP's success at the polls. Gul's renewed candidacy has done little to ease tensions, but most of our contacts -- even Gul opponents -- now expect Gul will become president.

13. (C) Some of the old tactics are brewing. Opposition CHP

intends to boycott the presidential vote again. Legal complications may also emerge; former Speaker Husamettin Cindoruk (CHP) argues that CHP can halt the election process by going to the Constitutional Court. Former Chief Prosecutor Sabih Kanadoglu dismisses this possibility, but stated that if Gul becomes president, he will likely be indicted for allegedly defrauding the Treasury during his time as a Welfare (Refah) Party official in 1998. Several colleagues, including former party chairman Necmettin Erbakan, were convicted of criminal charges in April, but Gul was protected by his parliamentary immunity (which he would not have as president). In a related civil suit, the court ruled that Gul was not responsible for Treasury losses.

¶4. (C) Important changes since April will make such tactics less effective, if not obsolete, this time. The July election obviates the argument that an end-of-term parliament should not elect the president. The election, with its higher rate of voter participation (over 80 percent) and more parties entering parliament, also moots the earlier claim that an unrepresentative parliament would be choosing the president. While pundits spilled a tremendous amount of ink earlier this year speculating that Erdogan would seek the presidency, on July 22, the public supported AKP knowing Gul was a presidential hopeful. All of these factors increase AKP's -- and Gul's -- claim to legitimacy. CHP, meanwhile, can no longer claim to represent all AKP opponents: nationalist MHP and center-left Democratic Left Party (DSP) oppose Gul but will not obstruct the democratic process. Even if Gul opponents pursue an obstructionist policy, perhaps through the judiciary, the failure to elect a president would lead to new elections at a time when confidence in AKP is demonstrably high.

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A New Era in the Presidency

¶5. (C) As foreign minister, Gul forged warm relations with leaders around the world; his presidency is likely to be a cosmopolitan and statesmanlike departure from that of Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who rarely left the presidential palace, let alone the country. Gul's broader view will provide opportunities for more effective advancement of Turkey's foreign policy agenda, particularly with regard to the EU and regional leadership. In turn, as president, his international attention may circumscribe anti-democratic shenanigans by keeping the spotlight on Turkey.

¶6. (C) Where President Sezer has refused to sign off on thousands of AKP appointments, resulting in a bureaucracy peppered with "acting directors," a Gul presidency would loosen the stranglehold. Sezer's blanket approach almost certainly barred qualified candidates, as well as those perceived to be unqualified, "ideological" appointments. Gul's reputation for presidential impartiality will be at stake, with each approval or rejection potentially assessed as a sign of his fealty to or independence from Erdogan. Educational appointments in particular will be carefully scrutinized for religious bias. Hurriyet columnist Sukru Kucuksahin also notes that Gul, who criticized President Sezer for ignoring academics, should heed academics in appointing university rectors.

¶7. (C) As Commander in Chief, Gul plans to be much more forward-leaning than his predecessor, undoubtedly in an effort to win the respect of a hostile military institution. Nuray Basaran of Star TV said Gul had told her that one of his first efforts as Commander in Chief will be to meet with the troops in Sirnak, one of the hardest hit areas in the battle against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). He and his wife will also plan to meet with the mothers of the martyrs (fallen soldiers). Gul will walk a tricky line on issues like the High Military's Council's expulsion of officers for religious activity, to which he had objected as Deputy Prime Minister.

¶ 8. (C) In his August 14 nomination speech, Gul set a high bar with many references to remaining faithful to the core attributes of the republic and the constitution. His emphasis on this document signals his sensitivity to some institutions' reservations. Given his campaign promises to rewrite the constitution, however, he will have a delicate balancing act to keep both pledges.

Mrs. Gul's Abbreviated Social Calendar

¶ 9. (C) Many secularist or establishment Turks complain that "a headscarf in the presidential palace" will convey a radical Islamic impression and that it would violate the secular sanctity of Ataturk's house. They worry that a covered First Lady would encourage young covered women and impose moral pressure on all Turkish women. Although some contacts describe her as "rigid," Hayrunisa Gul has shown herself to be flexible when necessary; she withdrew her application to the European Court of Human Rights on the university headscarf ban when her husband became Foreign Minister (many Turks have not forgiven her for filing of the case, which they cite as evidence she cannot truly represent the Republic as First Lady). At an August 15 meeting with Chambers of Commerce (TOBB), Gul reportedly said that his wife had offered to "disappear" for a while to ease tensions. Press reports claim that she has even consulted a fashion designer to "modernize" her headscarf. While receptions will likely be an ongoing source of irritation on all sides -- President Sezer refused to invite the covered wives of MPs -- Mrs. Gul seems unlikely to rush to throw down a gauntlet.

COMMENT: Fasten Your Seatbelts

¶ 9. (C) Gul's opponents may no longer feel they have the public backing to prevent his presidency, but they seem prepared to make the new president's life difficult and will watch him closely for any missteps. Once President, however, assaults on Gul himself will be difficult to disentangle from assaults on his office.

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¶ 10. (C) Former CHOD Gen. (ret.) Hilmi Ozkok's recent statement -- and assertion that CHOD Buyukanit agrees -- that it would be wrong for a person whose wife wears a headscarf to become president, signals that overt opposition to Gul's candidacy is no longer a realistic possibility, despite intense military disapproval. President Sezer's August 16 refusal to look at Erdogan's cabinet list (ref B) and Gen. Buyukanit's defensive response to media questioning on the same day contribute to the sense that state establishment forces are on their heels. Gul is still the presidential candidate, but the context has fundamentally changed following the July 22 election. How irrevocable that change is depends largely on Gul's ability to justify the people's democratic response to this spring's undemocratic presidential showdown. END COMMENT.

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